What is claimed is:

1. A method of determining if a link is alive, comprising:

establishing a secure link between a first node and a second node according to a security protocol;

sending at least one ping message targeting the second node over the secure link, the at least one ping message defined outside the security protocol; and

monitoring for at least one ping reply to determine if the secure link is alive.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein establishing the secure link comprises establishing a virtual private network session.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein establishing the secure link comprises establishing a link protected by an Internet Protocol Security protocol.

4. The method of claim 3, wherein sending the at least one ping message comprises sending at least one Internet Control Message Protocol message.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein sending the at least one ping message comprises sending at least one Internet Control Message Protocol message.

6. The method of claim 1, wherein establishing the secure link comprises establishing the secure link between first and second nodes each comprising a security gateway.

7. The method of claim 6, further comprising sending at least one ping message targeting another node behind the second node.

8. The method of claim 7, further comprising monitoring for at least one ping reply form the other node.

9. The method of claim 1, further comprising tearing down the secure link if the secure link is determined not to be alive.

10. The method of claim 9, wherein tearing down the secure link comprises tearing down a security association according to an Internet Protocol Security protocol.

11. A method of communicating with a remote node, comprising:

establishing a secure link between a first security gateway and a second security gateway, the remote node in communication with the second security gateway;

sending at least one ping message to the remote node over the secure link and through the second security gateway; and

monitoring for at least one ping reply from the remote node to determine if the secure link is alive.

12. The method of claim 11, wherein establishing the secure link comprises establishing a secure link protected according to an Internet Protocol Security protocol.

13. The method of claim 11, wherein establishing the secure link comprises establishing a virtual private network session.

14. The method of claim 11, wherein establishing the secure link comprises establishing a secure link protected according to a security protocol.

15. The method of claim 14, wherein sending the at least one ping message comprises sending at least one ping message defined outside the security protocol.

16. The method of claim 15, wherein sending the at least one ping message comprises sending an Internet Control Message Protocol message.

17. The method of claim 16, wherein establishing the secure link comprises establishing a secure link protected according to an Internet Protocol Security protocol.

18. A system for communicating between a network element and a remote node, comprising:

a security module adapted to establish a secure link with the remote node, the secure link having a security mechanism according to a security protocol; and

a keep-alive module adapted to send at least one ping message over the secure link to the remote node, the at least one ping message defined outside the security protocol.

19. The system of claim 18, wherein the security protocol comprises an Internet Protocol Security protocol.

20. The system of claim 18, wherein the at least one ping message comprises an Internet Control Message Protocol message.

21. The system of claim 18, further comprising:

an interface to a packet-based network, the secure link established over the packet-based network; and

a layer to control communications over the packet-based network.

22. The system of claim 21, wherein the layer comprises an Internet Protocol layer.

23. The system of claim 18, wherein the keep-alive module is adapted to further monitor for at least one ping reply responsive to the at least one ping message to determine if the secure link is alive.

24. The system of claim 23, wherein the security module is adapted to tear down a security association of the secure link if the secure link is not alive.

25. The system of claim 24, wherein the security association comprises an Internet Protocol Security protocol security association.

26. The system of claim 18, wherein the keep-alive module is adapted to further monitor for at least one ping reply responsive to the at least one ping message to determine if the secure link is alive, the system further comprising a module adapted to establish a link over a secondary communication network if the secure link is not alive.

27. An article comprising at least one storage medium containing instructions for controlling communications, the instructions when executed causing a controller to:

establish a secure link between a first node and a second node according to a security protocol;

send at least one ping message targeting the second node over the secure link, the at least one ping message defined outside the security protocol; and

monitor for at least one ping reply to determine if the secure link is alive.

28. The article of claim 27, wherein the instructions when executed cause the controller to further establish an Internet Protocol security association for the secure link.

29. The article of claim 28, wherein the instructions when executed cause the controller to tear down the security association if the controller does not receive the at least one ping reply.

30. The article of claim 27, wherein the controller is part of the first node.

31. A data signal embodied in a carrier wave and containing instructions for controlling communications, the instructions when executed causing a system to:

establish a secure link between a first gateway and a second gateway;

send at least one ping message to a remote node over the secure link and through the second security gateway; and

monitor for at least one ping reply from the remote node to determine if the secure link is alive.